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JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4605

July 9, 2009

The Honorable Gordon S. Heddell
Acting Inspector General
Department of Defense
400 Army Navy Drive
Arlington, VA 22202-4704

Dear Mr. Heddell,

My purpose in writing is to request an independent examination of the actions taken at each level of the chain of command during "The Battle of Wanat" in Afghanistan's Waigal valley in July 2008. This engagement resulted in a 75 percent casualty rate for the 2nd Platoon, Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team (CJTF-101).

I have familiarized myself with the command and tactical aspects of the battle and met with retired Army Colonel David Brostrom to discuss his allegations of command negligence. Owing to the gravity of the issues raised in his letter of June 22, 2009, to your office and the causal factors identified in a study prepared by the Army's Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, I believe a more thorough consideration of senior command accountability is warranted. Of note:

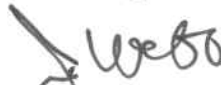
- The platoon commander on the ground was required to establish his combat outpost at a site selected for him by his senior commanders, not on the basis of his own tactical judgment. There is evidence the site was chosen for political reasons following protracted (10-month) negotiations with local Afghan leaders. Upon arrival, the platoon commander was forced to erect a tactical position without the requisite engineering or logistics support. Furthermore, the platoon commander gave repeated warnings to his higher command of the growing risk of imminent hostilities. Additional tactical assistance was not provided, and risk-mitigation measures taken by the chain of command seem to have been inadequate.
- When the platoon was ordered to deploy to Wanat, the 173rd was conducting an administratively demanding Replacement and Transfer of Authority with another brigade. Evidence suggests senior commanders may have been distracted from attending to a rapidly evolving insurgent threat. For example, the platoon deployed for its mission July 8 just days before the 173rd's scheduled return to the United States and only four days after an incident in the Waigal Valley that had significant security ramifications. Two pickup trucks, fleeing an Afghan medical clinic in Bella at the time of an attack on a nearby Army combat outpost, were destroyed by Army attack helicopters. All of the Afghan health-care providers from that clinic were killed by this attack. This incident had a far-reaching effect by angering Afghans throughout the Waigal valley—an alienation that appears to have contributed directly to the attack on July 13.

- The platoon commander was in frequent communications with the task force's tactical operations center on July 11 and 12. Senior commanders should have been more responsive to his on-scene intelligence assessments that indicated a growing risk of imminent hostilities. According to the Army historian's study of the battle, however, the CJTF-101 intelligence officer, despite protests from the 2nd Battalion, ordered the withdrawal of all intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets from Wanat on July 12. This action, with a platoon deployed at high risk, is on its face incomprehensible. The ensuing engagement the next day is testimony to the inadequacy of risk-mitigation measures at some point in the higher chain of command.

A more thorough examination of command accountability associated with an engagement that resulted in the deaths of nine soldiers and the wounding of an additional 27 is warranted for many reasons. I believe this engagement also offers important lessons that should be considered by U.S. commanders in Afghanistan during the current expansion of counter-insurgency operations.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Jim Webb
United States Senator

Copy to:
Secretary of the Army
Chief of Staff of the Army